

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

BY

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## SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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## **Abstract**

Support Systems is a multimedia art installation that addresses shifting personal boundaries in contemporary America and functions as a dialogue between the external battles we must face and the internal landscape we need to preserve. The artwork questions how we find a balance between protecting ourselves and making the connections that give us support. It consists of two integrated pieces. A video installation entitled 'Passive Aggressive' viscerally illustrates the difficulty of negotiating personal boundaries in public spaces. The second piece, entitled 'Comfort Zone,' consists of a comfortable, private space in which the viewer can retreat and privately listen to taped and edited conversations of women speaking about their own comfort zones and how they express or repress their need for connections.

## **Background**

I am intrigued by interpersonal relationships – how they form, how they dissolve, and their delicate underpinnings. I approach my artwork as an opportunity to explore this fascination, and consequently have moved increasingly toward working directly with members of the public. Negotiating boundaries is a complex requisite of interpersonal relationships. Our personal boundaries are like invisible membranes; their borders shift and protect, letting some people come close and keeping others at a distance. My ideal is that the boundary between ‘self’ and ‘the other’ is not a solid wall – instead it is both protective and permeable, like skin. Personally, I am constantly seeking to create boundaries that establish a balance – protecting me from becoming overly vulnerable and easily hurt, but allowing for the close interpersonal relationships that give me emotional sustenance.

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violent interplay of aggression and vulnerability. The second piece, entitled ‘Comfort Zone’ consists of a comfortable, private space in which the viewer can retreat and privately listen to taped and edited interviews of women speaking about their own comfort zones and how they express or repress their need for connections.

### **Social Context**

Although invisible and unspoken, social boundaries among strangers in public spaces are so habitual as to be palpable. These implicit laws have been identified by social-scientific terms such as ‘civil inattention,’ an expression coined by the American sociologist, Erving Goffman in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959). According to ‘civil inattention,’ strangers are to briefly glance at one another and avoid all further interaction for the duration of physical proximity. This particularly American standard of impersonal treatment has a double-edged consequence. On one hand it offers anonymity. But the resulting privacy comes at a cost – it requires emotional distance; that distance is what can make someone feel lonely in a crowded room.

A study published in 2006 by *American Sociological Review* entitled “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades” found that the average American’s core network of confidants has dwindled by 33% in the past twenty years (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears). The modal subject reported having three confidants in 1985, and reported having no confidants by 2004. According to the study, this could affect our well-being. “The closer and stronger our tie with

someone, the broader the scope of their support for us and the greater the likelihood that they will provide major help in a crisis” (p. 354).

Technology may partly be the cause of this significant social shift. While working to connect people on a global level, the Internet has moved social networks from direct, localized contact into the digital world of chat rooms and email. The study of McPherson et al. notes that, “...computer technology may foster a wider, less-localized array of weak ties, rather than the strong, tightly interconnected confidant ties” (p. 373). One of my interview participants echoes this presumption, stating, “A healthy relationship means being present with each other. The electronic age siphons that off; being plugged in all the time siphons away that energy of face-to-face contact”.

Whatever the cause, as the population skyrockets, Americans are living in closer proximity to one another; yet we are actually forming fewer close relationships. This observation leads me to believe that our personal barriers are stuck on ‘red alert’. We seem to have lost a fundamental sense of community and tend to treat strangers as a threat or an obstacle rather than fellow human beings. I believe that this creates a dilemma in contemporary American culture. With the current demands of economic crisis, high divorce rates, and increasing depression and homelessness, we depend even more on interpersonal connections just to survive. One interview participant for Support Systems offered the following observation:

It has gotten to the point now where unless you have a personal connection with someone [they] don’t really feel the need to show [you] respect or generosity...our first instinct today is to be untrusting, and that’s sad because it means that what we’re experiencing more is pain, and being hurt, and being betrayed.

On the occasion that an acquaintance is formed, the work of establishing a relationship while maintaining personal boundaries is a complex dance requiring careful footwork. Support Systems addresses the difficulties and rewards of making and maintaining the connections that give us the support we need and crave as humans. These are the ideas and concerns that drive my creative research.

## **Methods**

Because I feel so strongly that face-to-face contact is lacking in contemporary American society, I wish to literally bridge that distance in my method of art making. Working with willing participants from my community in a one-on-one format, I engaged with various individuals to create a performance video and an audio mix of conversations. This method of working outside of an art context brings me into intimate contact and dialogue with others, which helps my ideas develop within a broad framework that joins art with life. Both projects in Support Systems reflect a focus on my interest in women's perspectives. Working exclusively with women in this project allows me to explore the topic of interpersonal boundaries from a woman's point of view, examining the changing perceptions and expectations that women experience today.



‘Passive Aggressive’ marks a shift away from my previous quantitative documentary-style video work into the realm of performance art. In the work, I perform a fictional scenario with strangers I meet, becoming a visible participant and catalyst for the work. In ‘Passive Aggressive,’ the video scenario always begins when I move toward the stranger, throwing my arms around her body. Her reaction is to throw me away and treat my advances violently. As she becomes violent I do not retreat. Instead, I continue advancing, urging her to help me up only to be thrown down again. The video flips frenetically through footage of this scenario occurring again and again with different women in different public locations. It ultimately functions as a metaphor for internal emotional frustration that results from blocked connections.





In contrast, ‘Comfort Zone’ comprises a warm, homelike structure that offers the viewer a respite from the violence on screen. The structure provides the protection of three walls; the fourth wall is open, allowing the visitor to view the video while listening to the audio interviews. In order to facilitate a sense of comfort and encourage the viewer to enter and put on the conspicuous headphones, the environment is evocative of a warmly lit home interior. A comfortable chair is provided and allows the viewer to relax and spend time listening to the audio. Once the viewer settles into the chair and wears the headphones, she/he hears voices of women speaking in an intimate, conversational tone about what brings them physical and emotional comfort, and how they maintain their own support systems.



In the gallery installation, 'Passive Aggressive' is projected opposite 'Comfort Zone' on two large floor-to-ceiling corner screens. The double screens play mirror images of the video, giving a sense of inescapable repetition of the frenzied violence on screen. The homelike structure forms the third point of a triangle, providing an antithesis of tranquility to the harsh world that is represented by the video. In this context, internal and external forces are situated in opposition to one another – the intermediate space is dark and undefined, a reflection of my own search for a boundary in-between the two.

## **Conclusion**

The work in Support Systems articulates the conundrums caused by today's shifting personal boundaries. I hope that visitors to the gallery will pause and reflect upon these ideas, consider the activities in the video surrounding them, and ultimately participate in the act of sympathetic listening.

## **References**

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